The value of trained library and information professionals

The skills and expertise that library, information and knowledge professionals bring to the workplace are often not recognised or properly valued. **Simon Edwards** and **Alison Brettle** report on research to identify evidence supporting the importance of employing trained library, information and knowledge professionals.

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LIBRARY, information and knowledge professionals make a significant contribution to the aims of the organisations that they serve. And yet, their skill set is often overlooked and this contribution is undervalued.

In 2015, CILIP commissioned the University of Salford to undertake a piece of research to identify what evidence exists to support the employment of trained and professionally registered library, information and knowledge professionals.

The work was undertaken by Dr Alison Brettle and Michelle Maden, an Independent Information Specialist.

The aim of the research was to:

● Identify the evidence base to support the profession and members in making the case for their skills and expertise

● Create a range of value propositions based on the evidence

● Identify what further research is necessary.

This piece of research is important to both CILIP and the library and information profession. For the first time, we have created a set of evidence-based propositions which demonstrate the value of trained professionals.

Methodology

A systematic scoping review of the literature was conducted with the aim of exploring all library, information and knowledge sectors. Whilst the data extracted provides a robust map of the evidence, it is important to note that the evidence was not critically appraised in detail.

The review was undertaken using a framework proposed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) and followed these key stages:

1 Identifying the research question
Through discussion, the research question was refined to ensure that the project team could create a search strategy aimed at achieving the best results.

2 Identifying relevant studies
A comprehensive and iterative approach to the literature search for evidence was taken.

3 Study selection
The inclusion/exclusion criteria were refined via discussion amongst the project team and CILIP. It was highlighted that measuring the outcomes or impact of services is difficult, as the outcomes are often diffuse or will be realised over a long term. It is therefore easier to measure the effectiveness or impact of the contribution made by staff rather than a direct outcome. As a result, key outcomes considered included:

● Measures of time saved

● Measures of money saved

● Measures of outcomes relevant to the sector.

The initial search generated more than 7,000 results. Using titles, abstracts and, in some cases, the full article, these results were screened and sifted by the project team. A total of 135 studies were included in the final review.

4 Charting the data
Key elements were extracted from each of the papers to provide a map of the evidence.

5 Collating, summarising and reporting the results

Tables were created to summarise the evidence for each library sector. These were used to provide an overview for each sector area, highlight studies of note, and develop the propositions.

Public library and information professionals contribute to:

- a good return on investment (between 1:4 and 1:5)
- helping people improve their education, health, employment prospects and their sense of belonging to a community
- improved attitudes to reading and potentially improving reading ability.

Schools library and information professionals contribute to:

- improved student achievement
- positive pupil engagement
- improved reading skills
- facilitating student learning.

Health library and information professionals contribute to:

- improved clinical decision making
- improving patient-centred care
- aiding risk management and safety
- health service development or delivery
- helping to demonstrate efficiency/cost-effectiveness (including saving health professionals time)
- assisting healthcare professionals in pursuit of CPD.

Academic library and information professionals contribute to:

- improved retention
- better grades or degrees
- improved skills for coursework, assessments or research
- better research, researchers and research achievement
- a good return on investment for the university.

Key findings

Whilst it was disappointing that no evidence could be found for the value of professionally registered staff, this was not unexpected. What was found was a robust evidence-base relating to trained library and information professionals.

Although no library, information or knowledge sectors were excluded from the search, not all sectors provided evidence that met the inclusion criteria of the review. Therefore the evidence presented represents only four key library sectors.

Public, schools, health and academic sectors generated evidence of clear outcomes in relation to the value of trained professional LIK workers. These are outlined in the table, above.

Whilst an explicit link to advocacy was always intended as an outcome of the research, it was interesting to note that as a profession we do not always help ourselves. Much of the research is focused on the services as opposed to the trained staff that provide them. This was a theme that R. David Lankes discussed at the CILIP Conference in 2015. As a profession, we must do more to highlight the role of our skills in delivering these outcomes. Library and information services do not deliver these outcomes just by existing. They do so because those delivering these services interact with their users and create and develop products and services which ensure they meet user needs.

It is also worth noting that much of the evidence is held within grey literature or on websites – this can make it difficult to find and does not come up when doing formal searches for evidence.

Another interesting point is that whilst the evidence base focuses on four key sectors, it is likely that these propositions could be stated for other sectors. A key example of this is the return on investment. The contribution of between 1:4 and 1:5 were evidenced in public, national and academic libraries.

It is conceivable that a similar return on investment could be evidenced anywhere where there is a trained library, information or knowledge professional. It just hasn't been researched yet.

Areas for further research

The scope of this research was extremely broad. As a result, it was inevitable that the research would identify many other questions and areas for further research. The research highlights the need for:

- **Undertaking further research which focuses on the value of staff rather than services.** As mentioned, the evidence focuses on the value of the services rather than the people running them. By inference, it has been possible to ascribe this value to the staff, but it would be beneficial that research concentrated on staff roles.

- **Undertaking comparative studies to research the value of professionally registered staff.** What added value is gained by employing someone with Certification, Chartership or Fellowship? Does this impact on the outcomes or their approach to delivering those outcomes and what does that mean for employers?

- **Researching the value of trained and professionally registered staff in other sectors.** It should be possible to use methodologies employed by the referenced studies to test out value propositions in other sectors. This would be particularly interesting in the information and knowledge management sectors, where evidence for the commercial return on investment will be key to making the case for an investment in staff.

- **Conducting studies in the UK.** Some of the evidence used would benefit from being repeated or tested in UK institutions.

Accessing and using the research

The full report is available on the CILIP website at www.cilip.org.uk/valueofLIKworkers. The findings provide a robust evidence base which can be used to demonstrate the contribution made by library, information and knowledge professionals to overall organisational aims.

It can also be accessed from the Impact Toolkit in the Virtual Learning Environment (http://bit.ly/1QqlUq1). The toolkit is an online resource that provides practical resources, information and support so members can clearly and effectively demonstrate their value as professionals – and the value of the services they manage and provide – to key decision makers and stakeholders. [U]